Peter Tibor Nagy

THE NUMERUS CLAUSUS IN INTER-WAR HUNGARY
Pioneering European Antisemitism

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The year 2005 marks the 75th anniversary of the Hungarian Numerus Clausus—Act 25 of 1920—which restricted the percentage of Jewish college and university students in Hungary to the Jewish percentage of the country's total population, thereby excluding a great majority of Jewish students from higher education. It is highly symbolic as the first piece of antisemitic legislation put in place by a post-World War I European state.

The history of the Act has been relatively well documented. Indeed, it is perhaps this aspect of modern Hungarian history that is best known to historians and education specialists around the world. The Act constituted the first restriction in modern Hungarian history on the process of Jewish integration and assimilation. It was the first so-called "Jewish law" in twentieth-century Europe. With the passing of the Act, Hungary became the first country
to follow in the footsteps of Russia, which, in 1887, had decreed a "ceiling" on the number of Jews permitted to take part in secondary and higher education.

This article examines this well-known phenomenon within an analytical framework, based on thee propositions. Proposition 1 argues that political and social groups permeated by different types of Antisemitism (religious, anti-capitalist and anti-socialist) formed into a coalition. This "extra-coalition" gave rise to phenomena of directed against Hungarian Jewry. Proposition 2 holds that rational political considerations identified higher education as the field in which the process of Jewish emancipation could most effectively be stopped. Proposition 3 sees the issue of whether or not to implement the provisions of the Act as determined by the relative strength of different pressure groups operating in the political arena, rather than by any ideologies or values.

From Antisemitic Sentiments to an Acceptance of Legal Restrictions

Historians have long debated whether Antisemitism has been a continuous phenomenon in Europe ever since the Middle Ages.2 My interpretations holds that Antisemitism has not been continuous. Moreover, different types of Antisemitism have existed concurrently in Hungarian society. The medieval type of Antisemitism, the religious one, featured in the Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel case of 1882—a case that achieved fame or notoriety throughout

Europe. The publication of the memoirs of the attorney working on the case—a man who had drawn considerable inspiration from the Antisemitism of local peasants and had accused the local Jewish community of carrying out ritual murder—was an enormous market success in the 1940s. This demonstrated Antisemitism's ability to survive despite decades of modernization. In addition, as noted below, fundamentalist Catholic intellectuals were among the various proponents of the Numerus Clausus in 1919–1920.3

Another type of Antisemitism—a form based on anti-capital and "anti-finance" ideas and attitudes—was motivated by the Hungarian nobility's traditional views and way of life as well as a romantic peasant anti-capitalism.4 This traditional form of Antisemitism was hostile to the function of capitalism itself and would have preferred a society in which the mediator function did not exist at all.5

Unlike traditional, religious Antisemitism, the modern variety does not so much hate, as envy this function. This form of Antisemitism is no less than an ideology based on the appropriation of this function. The exclusion of Jews from universities and from some professions was merely a means of accomplishing this confiscation.

At the end of the First Word War, Antisemitism became an element in the competition between the various elites in Hungary. Prior to the war, social roles in Hungary had been very distinct: the Christian middle classes had sent their sons to work for the state or for local government offices, while the Jewish middle classes had sent their sons to work in non-statecontrolled sectors. Among market-controlled professions, the ratio of middle-class Jews was very high. Consequently, Jews comprised 42% of all journalists, and in Budapest the ratio was 48%. Jews also accounted for 53% of Hungary's commercial executives—and 64% in Budapest.6 Moreover 45% of lawyers and 43% of legal staff were Jewish.

On the other hand, the Christian middle classes were over-represented amongst teachers and public officials.7 After the 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty, which greatly reduced Hungary's territory, the country needed far fewer public officials. This meant that the Christian middle classes were obliged to secure positions outside the state-controlled areas.8

But we must also consider another factor. The modernization of the state after the turn of the century gave rise to a new issue, namely, the need for greater state control in some areas. Several groups in society began to develop an interest in the creation of non-marketcontrolled industrial, health and commercial sectors. Because these groups wished also to extend state jurisdiction to these areas and to enhance the power of the state's redistributive
institutions, they sought to prevent non-state-oriented Jewish commercial and industrial elites from obtaining key positions in these fields.9

At the same time, non-state-controlled positions constituted real power and prestige in society. For example, the press could be used to influence cultural attitudes, while the growth of a modern economy was rendering commerce, banking and transport increasingly important. Lawyers were becoming more significant in economic and business life, and an expanding social security system—in which Jewish clerks and medical staff held key positions—was beginning to dispose of an ever-greater share of national income.

German-Jewish workers had traditionally led the Hungarian workers' movement. As the workers' and trade union movements began to turn into a real political force, competitors of the traditional workers' elite began voicing antisemitic arguments. This process was not confined to the opposition movement. Thus, for instance, in the parliament of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, the Communist Party's populist elite used antisemitic
arguments in their struggle against the Party's central elite.10

The peace treaty was followed by the mass migration into Hungary of middle-class Hungarian-speakers from the successor states, resulting in stiff competition for positions and jobs. Against this background of increased competition, the Christian middle classes turned to the executive power for assistance in their struggle against the Jews. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the increased level of competition was not enough to persuade the
Hungarian middle classes—so proud of their adherence to a rule of law, the Corpus Iuris, a powerful symbol of their ties to Europe—to transform the Hungarian legislative into a means of violently suppressing the Jews.

Rather, right-wing public opinion began to argue that liberalism, radicalism and social democracy—all of which it perceived as manifestations of "Jewish cosmopolitanism"—were responsible for the collapse of the historical kingdom of Hungary. "National sentiment," which had been a natural associate of liberalism in the nineteenth century, became locked in a conflict with "liberal sentiment." In the end, the middle classes chose nationalism rather than liberalism, discarding the old principles of equality and human rights and giving the green light to restrictions against Jews. As shown below, although it was evidently the extreme right wing rather than the political center that gave the concrete impetus to the adoption of the Numerus Clausus, nevertheless without this "state
of competition" and the "contradiction between nationalism and liberalism," the country's elite might never have been willing to tolerate Antisemitism in the form of a parliamentary act.11

Motivations of a Numerus Clausus

The issue at stake was which sphere could be used to "administer" restrictions against Jews. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (which in 1919 had confiscated wealth and nationalized property), the

direct confiscation of Jewish property was no longer a real option. Moreover, given the country's dire economic situation, the exclusion of highly qualified Jewish accountants, engineers, and economists would merely have exacerbated the crisis. The only apparent "solution" was to assist the Christian middle classes by giving preference to "their sons" in the educational sphere.

Education already disposed of a sufficiently anti-liberal tradition. In the 1910s, right-wing political Catholicism had made significant strides in the sphere. The Ministry of Education had a good chance of obtaining the support of the churches because it had something concrete to offer them: the Ministry could (and did) make participation in denominational services a compulsory part of school attendance.

Why were restrictions on the number of Jews imposed at university level but not at secondary level? We may identify three important reasons for this:

(1) The Ministry wished to pacify the extreme right-wing students' movement, whose aim was the complete exclusion of Jews from university education. (In previous decades, the Jewish percentage of college and university students had grown rapidly from 10.4% in 1871 to 20.1% in 1880, 27.8% in 1890, 28.4% in 1900, and 29.6% in 1910.)12
(2) Surplus production of intellectuals and intellectual unemployment represented a popular and acceptable argument amongst most social groups.
(3) A university numerus clausus was relatively less disadvantageous to upper-class Jews, because they could afford to send their children abroad, whereas middle-class Jewish youngsters were excluded en masse. The system had to offer some concessions to the Jewish population: a numerus clausus in secondary education would have resulted in an absurd situation for Hungarian Jews. It would have been absurd to force a child to go
abroad at the age of ten or to prevent a middle-class businessman from obtaining a secondary education for his son.

A review of the concrete steps that led to the adoption of the Numerus Clausus Act demonstrates the existence of a coalition of different groups with various types of antisemitic attitudes. This becomes particularly clear if we look at the main arguments for the introduction of the numerus clausus put forward within individual university faculties. For instance, in the Faculty of Theology—where aggressive neo-Catholicism had already triumphed—ideological reasons (both anti-Judaism and anti-secularism) were emphasized, whereas in the Faculty of Medicine—where Jewish students were still relatively numerous— the relevant issue was "the competition between the elites."

Militant (right-wing) student organizations and the heads of various universities agreed upon a compromise similar to that already established in the field of macro-policy by right-wing paramilitary forces and the

conservative government. It appears certain that university governors gave up their beliefs and principles because a failure to do so would have left them unable to reintegrate students and to re-establish control over university life
and the selection of applicants. It is important to note that Professor Bernolák, the author of the incriminating legislation (see below), urged the pacification and supervision of the university student organizations.

The government needed to find a solution. It required arguments to counter the consternation caused by the Act in other parts of Europe and to maintain its relations with leading figures in the Hungarian industrial and financial sectors. (The Jewish “faction” formed a majority among both family retailer and wholesaler organizations.) While the Minister of Education was clearly an antisemitic politician and a supporter of government restrictions against the Jews, he and other members of the government knew that Antisemitism could not become part of an act of law. They knew that while restrictions might be acceptable to western public opinion if they could be explained in terms of a need for “temporary steps vis-a-vis the Jewish population” in order “to prevent antisemitic pogroms
stemming from communism and the war,” it would never be possible to demonstrate the necessity of including antisemitic provisions in the Corpus Iuris.

The solution was to play some parliamentary tricks. Thus, although the first bill submitted was merely a neutral financial restriction enabling the Minister to determine the number of prospective students regardless of their ethnic or denominational background, during the legislative process significant changes were made to the text of the bill.

The main political force, which disposed of a majority in the Parliamentary Financial Committee under the conservative politician Kunó Klebelsberg and a majority in the Education Committee under a Catholic prebend named József Vass, considered it necessary to include political provisions in the Act. “In the process of attendance, only such persons shall be acceptable whose national and moral attitudes are reliable.” Thus the Act became antiliberal in a political sense, because it paved the way for the exclusion of liberals and socialists from entrance exams. Each student needed to obtain a certificate from the local police with details of his or her political attitudes.

At a government party meeting, a group supported by Bishop Prohászka suggested a further amendment: “The percentage of races and nationalities among students shall not be higher than the percentage of the races and nationalities in the general population.” At the government party meeting, this clause received majority support.13

At the plenary session of Parliament, a right-wing university professor, Nándor Bernolák, submitted the amendment. The text was an absurdity under Hungarian law, because the word “race” did not represent a legal

category. In a logical sense, the situation was a very complicated one: although the real objective was evidently a reduction in the number of Jewish students, the Act could not declare religious affiliation to be one of the
selection criteria, because this might have endangered the stability of the Hungarian state. Although Protestants formed only a minority of the total population (with the number of Lutherans being particular small), they were significantly over-represented among both government officials and the intelligentsia, as well as among the urban and rural middle classes and, indeed, among all social strata that sought university places for their children.

The adoption of the new act—which was obviously antisemitic—provoked a wave of criticism around Europe. More than 50% of MPs were absent at the plenary session of Parliament when the Speaker asked for a vote. Ninety percent of the government, including the Prime Minister, as well as Andrássy and Apponyi (two well-known politicians from the imperial era) and Bethlen, Klebelsberg and Vass (who were to lead Hungary's consolidation in the 1920s) chose not to take part in the vote.

Their absence indicates that it was impossible for them to vote down the legislation against the will of the radical right-wing groups, the leaders of the anti-leftist and antisemitic terror of 1919–20, and the paramilitary forces. Neither did they wish to vote in favor of the legislation, given that they were being watched by authorities across Europe as well as by powerful groups in the Hungarian capital, whose support was vital to the consolidation of the regime. Nevertheless—and this is the important point—some of these politicians really did want the Act to be adopted, for they knew that it would provide more university places to the children of their middle-class supporters. (In the end, just 57 MPs voted in favor of the Act, with seven votes against. If opponents of the bill had left the building rather than participate in the vote, the Speaker would have been forced to abandon proceedings, due to a lack of numbers. Thus, even those MPs who voted against the numerus clausus—the Minister of Education was among them—actually ended up tacitly supporting its adoption.)

The Act did not mention the words "Jew," "Jewish," "Israelite" or suchlike. But the executive decree issued by the Minister of Education after its enactment included a list of the percentages of each of the national groups as well as the Jewish denominational group. The Minister indicated in this decree that the Jewish denominational percentage was to be regarded as a "national percentage."

The decree was a statistical and constitutional absurdity. Statistically, each national census from 1869 to 1920—and the situation remained the same even later on—had made a distinction between religious denominations and national groups. The "Jewish" category had always been listed among the denominations rather than as a national group—contrary to census practice in Russia and Romania, where the Jews had always been listed among the

national groups. Under the Hungarian constitution, church–state relations were based on the principle that none of the denominations were to be identified as a nation (this was an important issue not just with respect to the Jews, most of whom had been German-Yiddish speakers until their spontaneous assimilation into the Magyar-speaking majority, but also in relation to Orthodox Christians, many of whom belonged to the Serbian or Romanian
national groups. An important aim of the Hungarian elite was to “assimilate"—that is, to incorporate into the Magyar-speaking community —the Serbs and Romanians without forcing them to change their religious denomination).

Hungary’s three main Christian denominations, the Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran churches, which had earlier been so adamant that only a parliamentary Act—and not a ministerial decree—might change the status of a Church, nevertheless tolerated this dangerous precedent.

Implementation and Failure to Implement

The implementation of the Act was never “complete” or full. If the Act had been implemented fully, the national average would have been 6%. The fact was, however, that in 1921 Jewish students accounted for 12.6% of total students, and in 1926 the figure was 9.4%.14 At Hungary’s provincial universities, above all at Pécs—a new university—the percentage of Jewish students remained relatively high (more than 10%, but much less than before the war when it had been 50%).

Nor was the decree on “nationalist feeling” implemented. We have only sporadic data about left-wing movements at the universities, aside from a statistical survey carried out in 1924. This survey, however, indicates that almost two-thirds (6129) of 9754 students attending universities in Budapest—where the ratio of Jewish students was the lowest—were not members of right-wing student organizations. Only 50% of students regularly read right-wing daily newspapers, while 25% regularly read liberal or liberal/right-wing newspapers. (About 25% read no newspapers.)15

Some students had begun to protest against physical attacks by paramilitary groups against Jews, while other students, who wished simply to study, asked for government assistance in their struggle to avoid being forced into joining certain student organizations.16
The Minister of Education threatened action against the organizers of antisemitic disturbances in Pécs; he rebuffed the students’ committee of Sopron College and then arranged for the closure of the College, banning 42 students from the student mensa as a punishment for their antisemitic actions, and ignoring a subsequent national strike by students.17

In the autumn of 1926, the Rector Magnificus (President) of Budapest University reported that the disturbances had been organized by outside groups rather than by students, and that these external elements had

received payments from the political right wing. The screening procedure —an institution that in 1920 had been used against the Jews—was now employed against the non-student provocateurs.

Some political forces attempted to extend the sphere of authority of the numerus clausus. A right-wing group of MPs tried to prohibit Jews from teaching Hungarian literature and history, while another group sought the exclusion of all Jews from the teaching profession. In 1923 Gyula Gömbös, the right-wing opposition leader (who later served as Prime Minister (1932–1936) and called himself the great mediator between Hitler and Mussolini), proposed that the maximum number of Jews should also include converted Jews. Such a view represented a direct acknowledgement of racist Antisemitism. The majority rejected his proposal.18

In 1923 Gömbös also proposed controls on the accreditation of foreign diplomas— with the aim of limiting the number of Jewish students. Following political pressure from the right wing, the Secondary School Act of 1924 stipulated that the accreditation of foreign certificates should be subject to the approval of a special committee. According to contemporary estimates, about 20 billion Crowns were flowing out of Hungary each year as the result of a thousand Jewish students having been forced to study abroad by the numerus clausus.19

The Ministry of Education also issued a decree on secondary school entrance examinations—but this could never be implemented. The Bethlen government rejected proposals concerning an extension of the numerus clausus to secondary and vocational schools. It also ignored demands for the imposition of fines on denominational schools that failed to adhere to the numerus clausus.

In 1923 the opposition called for the abrogation of the numerus clausus. The proposal received the support of 37 MPs (socialists and liberals) but 84 MPs rejected it, while a further 123 MPs were absent. The vote demonstrated that whereas in 1920 the majority of MPs of centrist views had been opposed to the scheme, by 1923 they were prepared to rescue the Act, which was widely perceived to serve the interests of the middle classes. Nevertheless,
one may observe an interesting shift in the arguments put forward in favor of a liberalization. In 1920 opponents of the numerus clausus had referred to international public opinion and the long-term aim of a peace treaty revision. But now the liberal and centrist politicians referred to the necessity of facilitating the receipt of international credits. Indeed, the need for international loans had become a far more important consideration than the risk of
outrage at the international political organizations: the League of Nations had already discussed the numerus clausus on three occasions without formulating any consequences.20

The original socio-historical rationale for the introduction of the numerus clausus— that is, the competition between elites in an impoverished country—became even more grave following the mass migration of people into Hungary from neighboring countries. A total of 320,000 persons migrated to the country from territories ceded by Hungary to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Compared with 1910 levels, the number of lawyers rose to 125%, the number of chemists to 133%, the number of judges, teachers and doctors to 150%, and the number of public bureaucrats to 200%—and in the meantime Hungary's total population had fallen to just 60% of its previous level.

Klebelsberg, Minister of Education from 1922 until 1931, declared that his conservative beliefs demanded the total abrogation of the numerus clausus. In his view, while the only real objective—the ending of the competition between the elites—had to be accomplished, this should be achieved without antisemitic provisions. Klebelsberg had close relations with Jewish and other capital interests, many of which financed the cultural activities of the
Hungarian government as well as supporting scientific research. The image of cultural superiority was a central element in the cultural and foreign policy of the Bethlen government in the 1920s. Klebelsberg sent a letter to his Prussian colleague Becker explaining the obstacles to the full abolition of the numerus clausus put up by right-wing elements within the government party. But he knew that the limits on numbers could be raised, thereby turning the numerus clausus into an illusion.21

The government did not, however, propose the full abolition of the numerus clausus. Ministers had no compelling wish to do so, and they also had to consider the wishes of right-wing forces both inside and outside the party. In private correspondence to the Prime Minister, Klebelsberg wrote: "We do have to revise the Act—not in order to inflict (the scourge of) thousands of Jewish students on the nation, but, through rational moderation, to save the essence of the institution (i.e. the numerus clausus)."22

In 1928 the government submitted an amendment bill with a view to abrogating the most scandalous provisions of the Act. According to voting figures on the amendment, 173
MPs were present in Parliament—a far greater number than in 1920. A total of 139 MPs voted in favor of the amendment and 34 against. Opponents of the amendment included 13 social democrats and five liberals, as well as several right-wing MPs who wished to retain the original antisemitic formula. The amendment won the support of members of the government party and a majority of Christian Socialists. The liberal wing of the government party also supported the amendment.23

More then half of liberal MPs were absent at the time of the vote. Their principles did not permit them to support the amendment, and yet they too were in favor of changing the provisions of the Act. The liberal wing

of the government party, on the other hand, which had been unwilling to vote for the original Numerus Clausus Act, was present at the vote, and gave its support to the amendment. This group of MPs realized that to damage the unity of
the government party would merely have benefited the racists, thereby enabling right- and left-wing opponents of the amendment to scupper the government's compromise and prevent any liberalization of the system. In the Upper House, Albert Berzeviczy, who had served as Minister of Education from 1903–1905, declared that his belief was in the complete freedom of learning, but that any failure to support the amendment bill would merely leave the old Act in place.24

Unfortunately, the passing of the amendment to the Numerus Clausus Act represented the highpoint of liberalism and Hungary's consolidation during the inter-war period. The Christian middle classes continued to receive preferential treatment, but this was now based on a more complex system rather than explicit Antisemitism. Thus student percentages were set for different professions and different regions. Jews were concentrated in urban areas and in the commercial sphere—so the discrimination never disappeared.

In the 1930s the right-wing government drafted an extra annual report on the number of Jewish students attending universities and the subjects that they were studying. College and university administrators gradually reduced the ratio of Jewish students from 11.3% in 1931 to 8.9% in 1936. In absolute terms the decrease represented more then 500 Jewish students.25

The aim of the numerus clausus was not to promote the interests of 95% of the population at the expense of 5% percent of the population. Instead its purpose was to guarantee the interests of 210,000 Christian middle-class families (or 277,000 highly qualified non-Jewish individuals) at the expense of 60,000 Jewish families (or 78,000 equally highly qualified Jewish individuals). Thus, the effect of the numerus clausus was to ensure that 77% of the elite should receive 95% of university places. Nevertheless, it soon became evident that the numerus clausus was incapable of guaranteeing the Christian middle-class elite the stability that it desired. The great depression resulted in the mass unemployment of public officials, who then attempted to obtain the free-market positions held by Jews.

Conclusions

What were the underlying factors that led to the introduction and retention of the numerus clausus? In the 1920s Antisemitism seems to have been rooted in a kind of coalition of different political and ideological groups: modern bureaucrats who wished to control society and perceived the Jewish middle class as an alternative force that might threaten their objective; people that saw Antisemitism as an ideal channel for a revival of both Catholicism and Protestantism;26 politicians who

realized that the non-market-oriented middle classes felt threatened by the competition between the elites. Faced with the loss of their former stability, the old ruling elite was increasingly determined to exclude any competition. While the proximity of the Third Reich may have facilitated the adoption of the
"Jewish laws" after 1938, these laws were deeply rooted in the underlying structure and ideology of the Hungarian middle classes.

NOTES

1. The study is based on a paper presented at an EHESS conference on Antisemitism in Paris
in the autumn of 2000 which was organized by Victor Karady.
2. Kovács, "Az antiszemitizmus, mint társadalomtudományos probléma."
3. Kubinszky, Politikai antiszemitizmus Magyarországon.
4. Szabó, "Az 1901-es egyetemi 'kereszt-mozgalom'."; Szabó, "Nemzetkarakter és resszentiment."
5. Berger, "Antisemitism. An Overview."
6. Magyar statisztikai közlemények, 570 (hereafter MSK).
7. MSK, 775.
8. Karady, "Felekezeti státus és iskolázási egyenlôtlenségek."
9. Lackó, Szerep és mu, 184.
10. Tanácsok Országos Gyulésének naplója.
11. Ladányi, Az egyetemi ifjuság az ellenforradalom elsô éveiben.
12. Karady, Zsidóság, modernizáció, polgárosodás.
13. Ladányi, Az egyetemi ifjuság az ellenforradalom elsô éveiben, 152.
14. Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyv (hereafter MSÉ).
15. Statisztikai Közlemények (hereafter SK).
16. Nemzetgyulés naplója, 17/404, 26/361 (hereafter NN).
17. NN, 1922–27 24/319,26/265.
18. NN, 1920–22 1/381, NN 1922–27 22/189, 18/162.
19. NN, 1922–27 18/162, 27/38, 22/159.
20. NN, 1922–27 8/249; Spira, "Hungary," 115–128.
21. OSZK Archives, Letter Section, Klebelsberg to Becker 16 October 1928.
22. Romsics, Bethlen István, 201.
23. Képviselôházi Napló (Journal of the House of Representatives) (1927–32), 9/237.
24. Felsôházi Napló (Journal of the Upper House) (1927–32), 2/114.
25. Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében, 191.
26. Compare Catholic criticism of Prohászka's theological works in the 1910s with the silence
that followed his accusations against the Jews after 1919. By then some people did not hesitate to transform anti-Judaism into Antisemitism.

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The Author:
Peter Tibor Nagy is Research Professor at the University of Pecs, John Wesley College,
Budapest, and the Hungarian Institute of Higher Education Research. His major
research interest is the history and sociology of education, from 1850 to 2005.